

Reclaiming Our Future from MAGA: Infrastructure and Self-Reliance in the Black Community

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Abstract: In this paper, I examine the historical and contemporary infrastructure challenges facing Black communities in the United States through a social work lens. I explore how systemic racism, policy shifts, and political volatility have shaped Black responses over the past century—from Pan-Africanism to civil rights and contemporary DEI efforts. I propose a strategic vision of self-reliance, collective empowerment, and transnational solidarity rooted in Afrocentric social work and anti-oppressive practice. My argument is that true empowerment must involve community ownership of institutions, long-term structural planning, and a commitment to systemic innovation that goes beyond symbolic inclusion or reform.

Keywords: Black empowerment, infrastructure, social work, anti-oppressive practice, transnational solidarity

When examining the last century of Black life in the United States through a developmental lens, we observe a series of strategic responses to persistent and often lethal White aggression that I call *omnicidal racism* (e.g., Jim Crow, mass incarceration, White identity extremism/MAGA, and prohibitions against diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives). This form of aggression aims not only to marginalize but to erase. These responses mirror the psychological patterns observed in survivors of codependent abusive relationships, who alternate between strategies of resistance, negotiation, and adaptation for survival (hooks, 2000).

The first major phase of response was marked by movements toward autonomy and escape from systemic oppression, most notably through Pan-Africanism. This approach was championed by Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), which sought to unify people of African descent globally and promote economic independence, cultural pride, and political self-determination (Lewis, 1988).

A second phase emerged mid-century, focused on civil rights and legal protection through the mechanisms of the U.S. state. This included landmark victories such as *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and the Civil Rights Act of 1964, as well as the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Many of these gains were achieved through a combination of grassroots organizing and what legal scholar Derrick Bell later called *interest convergence* the notion that Black progress often aligns with the interests of White elites only when it serves their broader goals (Bell, 1980).

This legal and institutional strategy led to a partial dismantling of de facto apartheid and a reduction in de jure segregation. As a result, Black labor and spending power became more integrated into the mainstream U.S. economy through policies like Affirmative Action and, more recently, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives. However, an iatrogenic effect (e.g., harm caused by the very interventions intended to help) was the weakening of Black-owned institutions, businesses, and schools. Dependence on White-controlled political and

corporate structures increased, often leaving Black communities vulnerable to political shifts and backlash (Anderson, 2007; Baldwin, 1963/2016).

As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. famously warned in one of his later interviews, “I fear I am integrating my people into a burning house” (King, as quoted in Belafonte, 2011). His words captured the paradox of legal integration without structural transformation: a move into shared spaces without shared power.

I do not view infrastructure development as a dead investment; especially not for Black communities in the United States. Nor do I believe we lack the capital, the talent, or the vision to fund our own advancement. The core issue is not capability; it’s coordination, value enforcement, and aligning collective efforts with outcomes that genuinely serve us.

Reframing Infrastructure through a Social Work Lens

In social work, we are trained to assess not only the presenting problems but also the systems producing them. Infrastructure must include more than roads and buildings; it must encompass cultural, institutional, and social systems needed for sustaining well-being. For Black communities, infrastructure includes financial capability networks, cooperative economics, culturally responsive mental health systems, political education, and accountability structures that reinforce collective agency and mitigate systemic harm (Bent-Goodley et al., 2017; Schiele, 2000).

These infrastructural components form the basis for structural competence; the ability to identify and intervene in upstream systems shaping outcomes (Metzl & Hansen, 2014). When these systems fail or are insufficiently developed, social workers confront the consequences daily. Inadequate support manifests as underfunded schools, culturally mismatched services, and transient programs that vanish once external funding ends, leaving communities worse off.

The necessity for social workers to participate actively in building robust, community-owned infrastructure is clear. Our profession's core principles: justice, empowerment, and social change, require proactive engagement beyond direct practice to systemic interventions. This includes advocating for and developing social policy that supports long-term investment in community infrastructure, expanding the role of social workers as planners and organizers, not just service providers.

Black Empowerment as Collective Practice

Empowerment within social work is often narrowly conceptualized as individual self-efficacy. However, for Black communities, empowerment must shift towards collective capacity-building. This collective process must be deeply anchored in linked fate, shared history, and community preservation (Gutierrez et al., 1998). Afrocentric social work prioritizes interconnectedness, cultural integrity, spiritual wholeness, and self-determination, providing a strong foundation for collective empowerment (Schiele, 1997).

Social work must challenge the assumption that mainstream services, even when culturally competent, are sufficient. Real empowerment requires communities to own and control institutions that deliver care, education, and social services. Community-led institutions like cooperative banks, mutual aid networks, housing collectives, and culturally grounded educational institutions exemplify tangible empowerment practices necessary for Black self-determination.

We must also address the need to democratize access to resources and tools required to participate fully in new economic ecosystems. For example, ensuring access to broadband, technical training, and data sovereignty are all critical components of modern-day empowerment. Social workers can act as facilitators and advocates to help communities secure these resources and retain control over their development trajectories.

In today's rapidly evolving economic environment marked by gig work, automation, and digital surveillance; traditional pathways to economic stability are eroding. Wealth accumulation increasingly depends on ownership and control over digital and physical infrastructures. Social workers must engage in strategies ensuring Black communities are neither excluded nor made dependent but are instead empowered stakeholders.

Revisiting the Civil Rights Legacy through a Structural Critique

Currently, we are navigating a significant political reset. While the Civil Rights Movement opened essential pathways, its inclusion model often perpetuated structural inequalities. Derrick Bell's (1992) notion of the permanence of racism highlights how systemic inequities remain embedded, even within ostensibly inclusive reforms. Despite many Black individuals experiencing upward mobility, structural disparities especially the racial wealth gap persisted and worsened over subsequent decades (Derenoncourt et al., 2022).

Social workers must critically examine this legacy. Civil rights advances often integrated Black professionals into predominantly White institutions without transforming the underlying power structures. Consequently, intra-racial divides deepened, reinforcing class disparities and undermining solidarity. Social work interventions today must rectify this by fostering institutional sovereignty, supporting Black communities in governing systems crucial to their well-being, such as education, healthcare, and finance (Robinson, 1983; Wright, 2003).

Furthermore, understanding the historical patterns of inclusion followed by exclusion helps us anticipate and resist cycles of tokenism. While civil rights opened many doors, social workers must ensure these doors do not swing shut when political will or economic convenience changes. A transformative approach requires embedding safeguards and redundancy in systems that guarantee long-term equity regardless of the shifting political winds.

Applying Anti-Oppressive and Decolonial Practice

Anti-oppressive social work requires more than acknowledging oppression it necessitates actively constructing alternative systems. In the post-MAGA era, with attacks on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and the rise of overtly exclusionary policies, Black social workers must commit to systemic innovation rather than merely reforming broken systems. Decolonial approaches emphasize creating entirely new helping paradigms free from Eurocentric biases and pathological frameworks (Gray et al., 2008).

Concrete examples include developing sustainable pilot projects: Black-led schools, community-run health clinics, digital cooperatives, housing collectives, and civic forums resilient against political volatility. Philanthropy and public funding should no longer serve as long-term supports but as strategic, temporary accelerants. Funding must align strictly with community governance, transparency, and sustainability requirements.

We must also confront internalized oppression within our own ranks challenging the ways we may unconsciously replicate dominant norms in how we structure programs or evaluate success. A decolonial mindset challenges us to rethink not just what we build, but how we build it—and who benefits.

Long-Term Vision and Transnational Solidarity

Adopting a 100-year strategic horizon shifts our vision from short-term outcomes toward enduring systemic transformation. The ultimate goal is to elevate quality of life, minimize internal inequalities, and retain our most capable youth. Parallel systems reflecting Black cultural, economic, and political values must be fostered intentionally.

Transnational solidarity is critical. Meaningful institutional partnerships should bridge Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) with African institutions, community land trusts in the U.S. with agricultural cooperatives abroad, and digital entrepreneurship initiatives across the Black diaspora. Such alliances should transcend symbolism, actively redistributing knowledge, power, and resources within a global framework of mutual respect and collaboration (Ifatunji & Harnois, 2016).

Social work must move decisively toward these infrastructural alliances, ensuring ideological alignment around redistributive justice and collective self-determination. Building and maintaining such alliances requires commitment to cross-cultural dialogue, knowledge exchange, and the political will to prioritize Black global interests over competitive nationalism.

Final Reflections

Resistance to transformative change is inevitable, manifesting as opposition from those benefiting from existing disparities or through efforts to fragment communities by exploiting

differences. Yet social work equips us to anticipate resistance and create resilient institutions capable of weathering these challenges.

True transformation inherently disrupts the status quo. Infrastructure, in all its forms, is not a luxury for Black communities; it is an essential foundation for liberation and sustained self-determination. For Black America, reclaiming our infrastructure is reclaiming our future. The time for tentative reform is over; our task now is to build and protect systems worthy of the generations to come.

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